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ABSTRACT

The controversial uses of the generic research essay and literature in the composition class fuse together as one issue when one considers the use of literature to teach the research essay in the freshman composition class. This pedagogical approach requires that students read a novel, selected by the teacher, write several essays about it, and use the novel as the seedbed for discovering an appropriate topic for further research. Through such an approach, the teacher can (1) emphasize the heuristic aspect of research, (2) underscore the value of literature as a humanistic endeavor worthy of study and relevant to all students, (3) use literature as a stimulus for generating emotional and intellectual responses in students, (4) allow students the opportunity to explore and use their personal experience as an intellectual and emotional connection to their experience of reading the novel, and (5) generate less rote work and more thinking about research, especially the thinking that takes place during journal writing, personal interviews, and notetaking. (HOD)

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USING LITERATURE TO TEACH THE NON-LITERARY RESEARCH ESSAY

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USING LITERATURE TO TEACH THE NON-LITERARY RESEARCH ESSAY

"A book is a machine to think with. . ."(Richards, 1)

Problems and Solution

To teach or not to teach the research essay--that has been the question. Ever since Richard L. Larson's essay, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," appeared in College English (1982), composition teachers have been pushed to reconsider their attitudes toward teaching or not teaching the research essay. Professor Larson objects to what he calls the generic research essay, that composition-class practice in which students choose a topic, do library research on that topic, and write up their findings in an acceptable research-essay format.

Professor Larson's objection to such a practice is based on several arguments: that the generic research essay has "no conceptual or substantive identity" (Larson 813), that it has no "procedural identity" (Larson 813), and that it places too much reliance on the library, thus misrepresenting research by failing to realize that "much research that is still entitled to be

called humanistic takes place outside the library" (Larson 815). His final argument attacks the "service" feature of writing the research essay. As Larson states, "though we pretend to prepare students to engage in the research appropriate to their chosen disciplines, we do not and cannot do so" (Larson 815). An alternative, he suggests, the one recommended by his own department, states the following: "By the close of the semester, students will demonstrate their ability to write essays incorporating references to suitable sources of information and to use appropriate methods of documentation" (Larson 811).

Another controversial issue facing composition teachers has been whether to use literature in the composition class or not. At a recent College English Association,[2] one session was devoted to "Literature in Freshman English: A Tool or a Crutch?" Two of the four presenters argued against using literature in the composition class on the grounds that just as there is no transference between teaching grammar and teaching composition, so also is there no direct correlation between teaching literature and teaching composition. The other two speakers, equally adamant in their support of using literature in the composition class, stressed the linkage between thought and language and the need to generate a "hard" composition curriculum based on the study of literary texts rather a "soft" curriculum which primarily relies on pedagogical texts or teacher-directed procedures.

Both of these controversies, using the generic research essay and using literature in the composition class, fuse

together as one issue when one considers the use of literature to teach the research essay in the freshman composition class. In a written poll taken within my own department, I found that some teachers routinely use literature to teach the research essay. Those who employ such an approach focus on literary analysis, either the formalistic explication du texte or a combination of literary analysis and socio-historical study. Other colleagues, however, take a much less sanguine view of the use of literature in teaching the research essay. The following are replies to the question: What would it take for you to start using literature as the primary source material for the English composition research essay?

1. "Some measurable percentage of English majors" (a rather sardonic reply when one considers that Southern Tech has no English majors).
2. "I am not interested in using literature as the primary source for a research paper. I think the students should have a choice of topics usually related to their major area of study. For an ET (Engineering Technology) school and for technical students, I think this approach is adequate."
3. "I would need to be convinced that doing so would be the best for technical students" (Certainly a more open-ended position than Number 2).

Such a tension within my own department on the use or the non-use of literature in teaching the composition research essay suggests to me an historical analogue taken from my own teaching

experience. From 1970-1976, teaching only sophomore-survey and upper-level literature courses, I often used the literary research essay as a course requirement. However, when I became a composition director in 1976, I began teaching freshman composition for the very first time. Practicing my former habit, I assigned the literary research essay to my composition classes. Although most of the students completed the project, many grumbled about both its difficulty and its lack of relevance. It did not take me a long time, less than two semesters in fact, to abandon this approach. Basing my decision on student comments and evaluations, I quickly realized that I would have to initiate a new approach. That "new approach" was simply what Professor Larson distinguishes as the generic research paper. After all, in my thinking at that time, it at least had the canonical blessing of textbook publishers: it was the practice prescribed in most college handbooks.

Throughout the years from 1976 to 1983, I continued to try different approaches to teaching the research essay. My reasons for such experimentation were varied: my own need to change assignments from time to time; my desire to make the research assignment as pedagogically palatable as possible; and my wish to make the research assignment have as much intellectual significance as possible. The chief dilemma I continuously faced was the following: On the basis of my experience teaching composition, I knew I could not return to the practice of the literary research essay, and at the same time I myself considered the practice of the generic research paper rather questionable.

Obviously, I, too, had a pedagogical problem for which I searched for a solution.

Process

In my own search for a solution on how to use research in teaching the composition research essay, however, I wanted to incorporate several key objectives. I wanted to

1. emphasize the heuristic aspect of research, the fact that good research generally begins with good questions;
2. underscore the value of literature as a humanistic endeavor worthy of study and relevant to all students, not just English majors;
3. use literature as a stimulus for generating emotional and intellectual responses in students;
4. allow students the opportunity to explore and use their own personal experience which for them can emotionally and intellectually connect to their experience of reading the novel.
5. generate less rote work and more thinking about research, especially the thinking that takes place during journal writing, during self and personal interviews, and during notetaking.

The following process, I believe, represents a reasonable solution to my own longitudinal search and to the dilemma which many other English teachers face in teaching the composition research essay. Like any pedagogy, although it offers only one

of many possible methods, nevertheless, in the hope that it may lead many teachers of writing to use literary texts successfully in teaching the composition research essay and to experiment further along the lines this present research suggests, I offer the following practice of using literature to teach the non-literary research essay.

Literature, of course, may refer to any of the literary genres (poetry, drama, fiction, essays), although in using the term here, I am referring only to the novel. Second, the term "non-literary" research essay, unlike the literary research essay, does not focus on systematic literary approaches to the study of literature. It does not involve a full-scale explication du texte, nor does it rely on the use of literary criticism. It does not make a thoroughgoing study of literary terminology (terms such as style, tone, voice, imagery or symbolism), nor does it necessarily involve the use of such terminology in explicating the text.

The non-literary research essay, as I define it here, does involve the use of a literary text--the novel. Having read the teacher-selected novel and having written several essays about it, the student researcher uses that novel as the seedbed for discovering an appropriate topic for further research. In ascertaining the viability of a potential topic for their non-literary research essays, students then must ask themselves three basic questions:

1. How does my topic relate to the novel? That is, what is my topic's meaning and manifestation in the literary work itself?

2. How can I relate this topic to my own personal experience? (By personal experience is meant here not only one's own lived experience but also that experience to which one has access through interviewing either relatives, friends, acquaintances, or others.), and
3. How can I relate this topic to the world outside my own experience, to the broader cultural context, to the outside world? (Such connection may be made with any verifiable field: history, sociology, psychology, politics, philosophy, other literature, and so on.)

The investigation of these three sets of questions forms the basic structural framework for the entire research project. Thus, the non-literary research essay here refers to an investigation of a topic which uses a literary work(s) as the topical seedbed for the purpose of discovering the topic's meaning and significance in the literary work itself, in the author's own personal experience, and in some related cultural context.

Perhaps some specific examples of past student research projects will help to illuminate this abstract definition and description. One student, after reading the class-assigned novel entitled The Chocolate War,[2] Robert Cormier's young-adult novel, was captivated by the meaningless life which Jerry Renault's father lives. She could emotionally and intellectually relate that fictional experience to her own routine and dull life as a young housewife and mother not working outside the home. She could also relate the experience of her own father, who after a

back operation, stayed immobilized until his doctor told him that his life was in jeopardy unless he became more physically active. As an example of outside reality, she used the listless lifestyle of a recent divorcee, a next door neighbor. She also cited the literary example of J. Alfred Prufrock, alluded to in the novel, whom the researcher saw as example of a life extremely self-conscious, yet unconsious of its own unfulfillment and lack of love. What she saw as the common element in her examples--literary, personal experience, and outside reality--was the notion that all were psychologically comatose, all unaware that their lives were being wasted. Her title, "To Live is human, to Live divine," underscored her theme that "psychological comas are, in fact, not worth the risk. . . .Life is a precious gift that should not be wasted" (Bacon 6-7).

Another student, in a research essay entitled "Nonconformism: Is it Right for You?" defined nonconformism in its meaning today and in its religious etymology. From The Chocolate War, the student used as examples Jerry Reanult, the novel's non-conformist hero, and a minor character named Frankie Rollo, who stood up to a hostile and intimidating group named the Vigils. From the cultural context, the student used a historico-scientific example, that of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who developed the atomic bomb. Because of his personal opposition to the development of the H-bomb, Oppenheimer was later denied security clearance by the United States' Atomic Energy Commission. He also introduced such nonconformist groups as the Culture Club and individual musicians, such as Moe Bany,

Joe Stampley, Boy George, and Bette Midler. His own personal response provided yet another example of non-conformism. Having successfully worked in electronics at General Electric for two years, his fellow employees thought he was a fool to leave such a good job to return to college. His hope is that his non-conformism to his group of peers will yield dividends down the road after he finishes college. "Nonconformism, on the whole," he concluded, "has a positive effect on our lives and will be very beneficial to those of us who are unafraid to take the risk" (Hayes 7).

Examples, of course, could be multiplied, but I think these digests illustrate the application sufficiently well. To produce such results, however, requires an extended focus on teaching the various components of the research project. The following timetable lists these componerts in chronological sequence.

USING LITERATURE TO TEACH THE NON-LITERARY RESEARCH ESSAY

A TIMETABLE

WEEK	GOAL	ACTIVITIES
1	Introduce novel	Assign readings; oral/written quizzes
2	Finish novel	Assign readings; oral/written quizzes
3	Essay 1 on novel	Essay of analysis: connecting parts and seeing parts in whole; documentation (3 quotes from text)
4	Essay 2 on novel	Evaluation: forming judgments; establishing criteria; documentation (3 quotes from literary text)
5	Topic Choice	Use reference works; consult indexes; fill out planning sheet; oral presentations
6	Interviews	Self Interview and Personal Interview (questions prepared and given beforehand)
7	Definition essay	Mini-research essay using three sources and bibliography; MLA styesheet
8	Argumentative essay	Mini-research essay, including title page, formal outline, body, and bibliography; pagination
9	Semi-final draft: Research essay	Complete research paper, including all parts; semi-final form
10	Final draft: Research essay	Completed, proofread, and typed manuscript; Oral presentations

Pedagogy

One inherent benefit of this approach is that it utilizes process in teaching the research essay, and composition research of the last two decades has documented the importance of process in teaching composition. The same emphasis, I would argue, applies to teaching the research paper. From the above table, for instance, for the first mini-research essay of Week Seven, students are required to use three quoted references and to complete the Works-Cited page as their bibliography. For the second mini-research essay, students must also submit, in addition to the bibliographical references, a title page and a formal outline page. Students who practice such documentation and format procedures in several mini-research essays will perform much more competently in handling that process on the extended assignment. As one student commented: "The slow process of researching through the mini-research essays provided me with the necessary knowledge and writing experiences needed to write the research essay." Such incremental repetition, indeed, becomes a model of the students' learning process.

A second value in using this approach is the importance it gives to thinking. The more opportunity students have to think about their topics, the better equipped they will be to discuss their thoughts in the final research essays. The writing assignments listed in the above timetable are designed to augment this benefit. From the recall of information on the oral and written quizzes, students are next led to analyze the novel by

tracing through the novel's several parts and connecting them into a meaningful whole. Typically, the students choose character development, but a few focus on dominant image or overall meaning. The essay of evaluation (Week Four) offers students the opportunity to form judgments about the work considered, to establish criteria as the basis for examining one of their judgments, and to apply their established criteria to the judgments they have made. These essays, and others which the inventive teacher may devise, require students to think about topics and viewpoints which otherwise they might never consider. In addition, these written assignments produce several practical benefits. They force students to read the novel carefully; they cannot "skim over" the book. Second, they help students to channel their thoughts into the framework of their research topics. Third, they stir student interest not only on the research topic but also on other ideas and situations that may affect that topic.

For those who object to the generic research essay, this approach connects the research methodology to specific content, namely, the topic taken from the literary work. It provides an investigative sequence as well: analyzing and evaluating the literary work, discovering a topic and delineating its use in the novel, then connecting the topic to personal experience, and finally linking the topic to a cultural context. This approach makes use not only of library research but also of one's own personal experience gained through self and personal interviews. Such a link-up of literary with real-life experience

is a valuable one, what David Bleich designates as an "associative response," "the most complex but the most useful form of expressing feelings about literature" (Bleich 48).

The sequence of activities given in the Timetable may also provide a clearer direction to those teachers already convinced of the value of using literature in teaching the composition research essay. The sequence provides repeated opportunities to develop student reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. For instance, the oral presentations of Week Five not only offer the speaker an opportunity to organize and present the state of his/her research, they also provides the classroom audience an opportunity to hear a variety of topics and approaches, some of which may be useful to themselves. Second, such a presentation offers the speaker the opportunity for feedback-suggestions offered by peers, suggestions which may develop into fruitful resources and avenues of investigation.

Another benefit of this approach is that it demonstrates what Louise Rosenblatt calls literature as exploration: that far from being a passive study, literature "is a form of intense personal activity" (Rosenblatt vi). In connecting the world of the novel with one's own personal world, the student researcher can "gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible" and can "find molds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experiences" (Rosenblatt 8). In conecting the novel to a cultural context, the student researcher can turn to other disciplines for further real-life examples and enlightenment. Thus, "our desire to understand a particular

work, like a stone thrown into water, will produce ever widening circles of interest" (Rosenblatt 138).

Such a ripple effect produced by research into the novel, personal experience and cultural context, will produce in students a broader vision of life and reality than that they previously had. Such use of literature "helps to build up in the student's mind the habit of viewing people and situations from the broader perspective of their social contexts" (Rosenblatt 144). Indeed, my own students write clearly of such a change in their own perspectives. One student, who focused on the topic of dedication, wrote: "My views on dedication became broader and more knowledgable. Each source taught me a different concept on dedication. I learned that dedication can be the inspiration for everyone, from heros (sic) to terrorists." Another student, whose topic was patriotism, wrote:

> My views on patriotism before researching the subject were rather nonchalant. I felt patriotic. . . .Still, my feelings toward patriotism were not defined. . . .However, I can now state my feelings clearly and concisely. I love the United States, its people, and all it stands for. I do, however, realize that when patriotism is taken to an extreme it can and oftentimes does result in negative effects.

Still another student added: "Before doing the paper, I had never really pondered the thought of good coming from evil". . . .I discovered I could look back into my personal life to find certain ways through which evil conceived good."

Still yet another value of this approach is that it offers an example of how a teacher can integrate learning within a classroom situation. Much has been said about the fragmentation of learning in today's colleges. One of the central thrusts behind the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, as a matter of fact, has been the emphasis on re-integrating the college curriculum through the use of writing. Oftentimes, however, English teachers have not taken advantage of their own literary backgrounds in searching for ways to re-integrate knowledge within their own classrooms. The above-mentioned process of teaching the research essay offers a viable and valuable opportunity for achieving such integration in the English classroom. Not only do students have the opportunity to study intensively a literary work through their essays about the novel, they also are able to connect this knowledge to their own personal experience, thus integrating the literary study with their own emotional and intellectual lives. Second, through the use of interviews, the can broaden their understanding of topics by listening, recording, and critiquing the interviews of people they know. Finally, by connecting the topic to the world in which they live, students can grasp the implications of their novel from a cultural context, whether it be historical, medical, sociological, psychological, or whatever. Thus, the entire project offers students the opportunity to integrate many skills and many facets of their experience, thus fulfilling the prediction of David and Lois Fowler, who in 1984 foresaw "a fruitful reintegration of the teaching of writing with the teaching of literature. . ." (Fowler 43).

NOTES

[1]The meeting referred to is the Georgia-South Carolina College English Association conference held March 1 and 2, 1985 at West Georgia College in Carrollton, Georgia.

[2]To support my use of young adult novels, I offer the following arguments. One, my students find the novels of Robert Cormier interesting, challenging, and intellectually significant. No student has ever commented that these works were beneath their level of ability. Two, the philosophical, psychological, and social issues discussed in Cormier's fiction can be given fuller, more comprehensive consideration in a college-level classroom. Third, I find that college students, having already experienced the stages of growth written about in Cormier's fiction, are better equipped to write about them from analytical, argumentative, and evaluative perspectives.

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